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Bulgarian in the Pope Inquiry: Do I Look Like a Conspirator?

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SOFIA, Bulgaria, Jan. 24 — With indignation, two Bulgarian officials wanted for questioning by an Italian magistrate said they were innocent of any involvement in the shooting of Pope John Paul II.

The two officials, who until recently served in the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, were interviewed separately by arrangement with the Government.

One official, Todor Stoyanov Ayvasov, until recently the chief accountant of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome, said, "Now that you have met me and talked with me man-to-man, please tell me frankly: Do you really think I look like a conspirator of murder?"

Mr. Ayvasov, 39 years old, is well built, has dark hair and displays a ready smile and the ruddiness of a man who has just returned from a week's skiing with his 13-year-old son. His blue blazer, dark flannel trousers and smart blue-stripe tie, far from the bulk and drab of Bulgarian tailoring, show the benefits of a three-year stay in Italy.

Major Back in Uniform

Maj. Zhelio Kolev Vassilev, unlike his former embassy colleague, no longer wears smart Italian tailoring. His return to Bulgaria from his three-year semi-diplomatic assignment as secretary to the military attaché has put him back into the greenish-brown of an officer of the Bulgarian Army's armored branch.

Major Vassilev, 40, is short and wiry. He appeared as disciplined and sober as the image of what he called himself — "a tank officer of the Warsaw Pact armies" — with pride softened by a snicker of self-deprecation.

The major insisted on reading a prepared denial of all accusations before answering questions. "I deeply condemn the terrorism of Agca," he said. "I have never seen him and never met him."

Mr. Ayvasov folded and unfolded his prepared denial throughout the interview but did not refer to its text until the end of an hourlong conversation to enter a similar denial and condemnation of terrorism.

'Not a Beginner'

The two Bulgarians said they had met Bekir Celenk, a Turkish businessman and suspected narcotics and arms smuggler, also wanted for questioning by Italy, only once, at a news conference arranged by Bulgaria last month to deny the charges against its citizens that the Italians are still investigating. Asked what his impression of him was, Major Vassilev said, "He is not a beginner in business."

Responding to Italian press reports that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk con-

victed of shooting the Pope, proved his familiarity with the three Bulgarians who are implicated by describing one or more of their apartments and citing their unlisted telephone numbers, Mr. Ayvasov said he had not had a telephone. Major Vassilev said the three apartments in which he successively lived had telephones listed in their owners' names.

"If Agca mentioned my private number," the major said, "it proves the secret service gave it to him. Frequently it went off for half an hour because the officer bugging it must have gone out for a cup of coffee."

Major Vassilev refused to give his addresses. "If Italy is interested," he said, "let them find out."

Left Rome in August

Major Vassilev said he left Rome in August, before the arrest of Sergei Ivanov Antonov, a representative of the Bulgarian national airline, on Nov. 25 on suspicion of complicity in the assassination attempt. That was before his name and Mr. Ayvasov's name appeared in the Italian press as suspects sought by Judge Ilario Martella, the magistrate charged with investigating the case and preparing an act of accusation if warranted.

Mr. Ayvasov left Rome on Nov. 5, on what he called a routine visit to the Foreign Ministry in Sofia to discuss the budget of the embassy in Rome. He said that after his departure Italian authorities inquired into the possibility of lifting his judicial immunity, and Bulgaria reassigned him to duties at the ministry. He said he was in charge of the finances of several embassies in Europe.

'It Seemed Even Funny'

"My first impulse was to return to Italy, immunity or no, to reply," he said, his voice rising. "It seemed even funny at first, a mistake. But I know the reality in Italy, and I know what kind of guarantees I could expect there!"

Major Vassilev said he had been reassigned to an armor command that kept him partly in the field and partly in the capital. He returned at the end of his normal assignment, he said, emphasizing that he stayed longer than expected and even took a vacation in Italy after introducing his successor to his duties.

"My life in Rome was quite different from a secret agent's life in the spy novels," he said. "I led an ordinary working man's life, regular hours, not rich in social events — the life of a Bulgarian in a foreign country."

"It was my first foreign assignment and probably my last," Major Vassilev continued. "What country would accept a major terrorist?" He shrugged.

The two spoke with scorn of charges

attributed to Mr. Agca in the Italian press that they accompanied the Turkish gunman for rehearsals of the assassination of St. Peter's Square on the two days preceding the shooting and drove him there, in a rented car, on the day of the crime, stopping off at Mr. Ayvasov's apartment to pick up an attaché case with pistols and grenades.

Mr. Ayvasov said that the apartment house in which he lived, a property of the embassy, was under constant surveillance by Italian agents and that he would have been an uncommonly stupid spy if he had driven the assassin to the scene himself and gone to his house to pick up weapons on the way.

After the murder of Aldo Moro, the former Italian Prime Minister, in 1978, Major Vassilev said, Italian authorities invited the embassy to arm some of its staff in self-defense. Bulgaria had declined to avail itself of the right, he said, and kept no weapons at the embassy.

The officials said they had alibis for the three days in question but refused to disclose them.

"I remember what I did on May 11, 12 and 13, but I wouldn't be so naïve as to tell it to the press," the major said. "It would give Agca's pilots a chance to correct their accusations."

The officer asserted that the Turkish terrorist was being prompted in his accusations by the Italian secret services. The purpose, he said, was either to divert attention from scandals that had implicated such agencies or a campaign against Bulgaria and other Communist countries.

"It is a narrow view that only the Italian services are playing a part in this campaign," he said. But neither official echoed a charge often made in the Bulgarian press that the Central Intelligence Agency is behind the accusations.